

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3689

INFO AMCONSUL ASMARA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 3138

E.O.11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS ET

SUBJ: LALIBELA AMCITS REACH ADDIS SAFE AND SOUND: DEBRIEFING

REF: ADDIS 3087 AND 3095

SUMMARY. THIS MESSAGE SETS FORTH HIGH POINTS OF POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE FROM DEBRIEFING OF AMCITS FROM LALIBELA. THEY NOTE THAT INSURGENT FORCE PRIMARILY MIDDLE-AGED AND POORLY ARMED; THAT ITS LEADER TRIED TO PRESENT IT AS PART OF COORDINATED INSURGENCY ENCOMPASSING GROUPS RESPONSIVE TO GENS. NEGA TEGEGNE AND TADESSE BIRU, AS WELL AS RAS MENGESHA SEYOUM. VILLAGERS GREETED INSURGENTS AND THEIR LEADER WITH RESPECT BUT WITHOUT COMMITMENT. INSURGENTS TARGETED GOVERNMENT PROPERTY IN LALIBELA AND PROCEEDED DISCRIMINATELY TO DESTROY IT. GOVERNMENT FORCE REPORTED BACK IN CONTROL OF TOWN BY NOON, MARCH 16, ALTHOUGH WE NOTE THAT EXISTING PRIVATE ADDIS-LALIBELA RADIO LINK STILL INOPERATIVE AFTERNOON MARCH 17, SUGGESTING POSSIBLE FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

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IN LALIBELA AREA. END SUMMARY.

1. LALIBELA WAS RETAKEN BY ESTIMATED 100 GOVERNMENT TROOPS MORNING MARCH 16. AFTER CLASH DESCRIBED TO US AS "SHORT SHARP FIGHT", REGULARS AGAIN IN CONTROL OF TOWN BY NOON AND INSURGENTS BACK IN HILLS.

2. AMERICAN CONVOY (FIRST REFTTEL) EVENTUALLY INCLUDED NINETY PERSONS, AMONG THEM AN ESCORT FROM THE INSURGENT FORCE TASKED WITH ASSURING ITS SAFE CONDUCT THROUGH THE REBELLIOUS AREA. CONVOY WAS SPOTTED BY USAID AIRCRAFT AND MADE GOOD PROGRESS. IT ENCOUNTERED RELIEVING FORCE OF GOVERNMENT TROOPS WHO CHECKED IT OVER CAREFULLY (BUT DID NOT IDENTIFY REBEL EMISSARY) BEFORE PERMITTING CONVOY TO PROCEED UNHARMED.

3. EAL CHOPPER PICKED UP WOUNDED FLIGHT ATTENDANT AND TRANSPORTED HIM TO KOMBOLCHA FOR MEDICAL CARE. HE IS EXPECTED TO RECOVER.

4. AID AIRCRAFT MADE TWO RUNS TO PICK UP AMCITS, OTHER MISSION PERSONNEL, ETC., ALL OF WHOM REACHED ADDIS AFTERNOON/EVENING MARCH 16.

5. DEBRIEFING YEILDED FOLLOWING NOTEWORTHY POLITICAL POINTS (MILITARY AND OTHER RELEVANT MATERIAL TO BE REPORTED SEPARATELY):

A. DEJ. BERHANE-MESKEL DESTA -- WHO WAS GOVERNOR THIS AREA FOR 19 YEARS -- IS COUSIN OF LATE RAS ASRATE KASSA. HE EXPLAINED TO AMCITS THAT HE HAD URGED RAS ASRATE NOT TO SURRENDER, FORESEEING HIS FATE, AND SAID HE COMPELLED WORK FOR OVERTHROW OF EPMG. ALTHOUGH OLD ORDER HAD TO CHANGE, DIRG IS NOT ANSWER. IT IS RUINING ETHIOPIA.

B. BERHANE-MESKEL TRIED PRESENT HIS FORCE AS PART OF COORDINATED INSURGENCY ENCOMPASSING GROUPS RESPONSIVE TO LEADERSHIP OF MG NEGA TEGEGNE, RAS MENGESHA SEYOUM AND BG TADESSE BIRU. IT NOT ALTOGETHER CLEAR EXTENT TO WHICH PRESENTATION DESIGNED FOR EFFECT. HOWEVER, OUR PEOPLE QUITE CERTAIN THAT BERHANE-MESKEL IN TOUCH WITH OTHER ELEMENTS, JUDGING BY CONSTANT COMING AND GOING OF MESSENGERS.

C. INSURGENT FORCE POORLY ARMED WITH OUTDATED WEAPONS AND DISTINCTLY MIDDLE-AGED. IMPRESSION LEFT IS THAT THESE ARE MEN WHO PSYCHOLOGICALLY STILL COMMITTED TO OLD ORDER STATUS HIERARCHY.

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D. VILLAGERS IMMEDIATELY ARMED THEMSELVES AS INSURGENT FORCE PUT IN APPEARANCE BUT WEAPONS, WHICH APPEARED AS IF BY MAGIC FROM HIDING PLACES IN EVERY "TUKUL", CLEARLY INTENDED TO BE USED IF NECESSARY FOR SELF-DEFENSE RATHER THAN AGAINST INSURGENTS OR, FOR THAT MATTER, GOVERNMENT'S REGULARS.

E. POLICE AND RAGGED TERRITORIALS (ESTIMATED 20 PLUS 30) DEPLOYED TO DEFEND TOWN (AND THEIR HONOR) AT SLOW APPROACH OF INSURGENTS. THEY HAD RESONABLE PLAN FOR DEFENSE LALIBELA

AND MOVED TO CARRY IT OUT. HOWEVER, THEY BEGAN FIRING ON INSURGENTS WHILE LATTER STILL WELL OUT OF RANGE THEIR WEAPONS. IN EXCHANGE WHICH FOLLOWED, POLICE AND TERRITORIALS FELL BACK ON GOVERNMENT COMPOUND/BUILDINGS WHICH PRIME TARGET OF INSURGENTS. WHEN BUILDINGS EVENTUALLY ATTACKED WITH EXPLOSIVES, PPICE AND TERRITORIALS WITHDREW INTO HILLS. AT LEAST 4 KIA RESULTED AMONG ANTAGONISTS AND SOME LOSS OF LIFE AMONG VILLAGERS EVIDENT FROM MOURNING WHICH FOLLOWED.

F. INSURGENTS DESTROYED EPMG INSTALLATIONS, FILES, ETC. THEY PROCEEDED DISCRIMINATELY AND QUITE THOROUGHLY, E.G. RINDERPEST VEHICLES WERE LEFT INTACT; POLICE VEHICLES WERE DESTROYED. GENERATORS AND TRANSMITTERS (POLICE, EAL, TELECOMMO) WERE SMASHED, WHILE HOTEL'S UNTOUCHED. BERHANE-MESKEL ORDERED HIS MEN TO LEAVE HOTEL AND TOURISTS UNHARMED AND HE WAS OBEYED, ALTHOUGH SOME LOOTING OF HOTEL OCCURRED LATER.

G. COMMAND AND CONTROL NEVERTHELESS RELATIVELY LAX, E.G. BERHANE-MESKEL ORDERED ROAD TO KOBO "CUT" AND THIS WAS DONE BUT ETHIOPIANS WHO PROCEEDED WITH AMCIT CONVOY HAD LITTLE TROUBLE REMOVING OBSTACLES (ROCKS). PROFESSIONAL JOB COULD HAVE KEPT GROUND FORCE REGULARS OUT OF AREA FOR DAYS, BUT "CUT" WAS SLAP-DASH AFFAIR.

H. VILLAGERS RESPONDED TO BERHANE-MESKEL HIMSELF WITH RESPECT RATHER THAN COMMITMENT. THEY HELPED THEMSELVES TO CONTENT GOVERNMENT COMPOUND ONCE INSURGENTS GAINED CONTROL BUT (ALTHOUGH THIS COULD EARN THEM RETRIBUTION FROM REGULARS) INTENT WAS ALMOST CERTAINLY PERSONAL PROFIT RATHER THAN EXPRESSION ANTI-EPMG FEELING.

I. ALL VILLAGERS IN LALIBELA REGION KNEW ALMOST AT ONCE WHAT HAD OCCURRED. THEY ARE ALL VISIBLY ARMED.

J. DEJ. BERHANE-MESKEL EXPRESSED FEELINGS OF FRIENDSHIP TOWARDS AMERICA AND AMERICAN S AND CLEARLY DID WHAT HE COULD TO PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR THEM.

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6. RADIO COMMUNICATION LINK BETWEEN TRAVEL AGENCY IN ADDIS AND SEVEN OLIVES INOPERATIVE MARCH 17 MID-AFTERNOON, SUGGESTING FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS COULD BE IN COURSE IN LALIBELA AT THIS TIME. WYMAN

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